



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

Armstrong Ranch

1400 South 19th
Bozeman, MT 59718

December 27, 2001

To: Governor's Office, Todd O'Hair, Room 204, State Capitol, P.O. Box 200801, Helena, MT 59620-0801
Environmental Quality Council, Capitol Building, Room 106, P.O. Box 201704, Helena, MT 59620
Dept. Environmental Quality, Metcalf Building, P.O. Box 200901, Helena, MT 59620-0901
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Director's Office
FWP Commissioners

Legal Unit
Wildlife Division

Design & Construction Bureau

MT Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, P.O. Box 201202, Helena, MT 59620-1201
Montana State Parks Association, P.O. Box 699, Billings, MT 59103
Montana State Library, 1515 E. Sixth Avenue, P.O. Box 201800, Helena, MT 59620
James Jensen, Montana Environmental Information Center, P.O. Box 1184, Helena, MT 59624
Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, P.O. Box 595, Helena, MT 59624
George Ochenski, P.O. Box 689, Helena, MT 59624
Gallatin County Commissioners, Gallatin County Courthouse, 311 W. Main, Bozeman, MT 59715
Gallatin County Road Office, 201 West Tamarack, Bozeman, MT 59715
Jerry DiMarco, P.O. Box 1571, Bozeman, MT 59771-1571
Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624
Wayne Hurst, P.O. Box 728, Libby, MT 59923
Glenn Hockett, Gallatin Wildlife Association, 745 Doane Road, Bozeman, MT 59715
Tom Sather, Headwaters Fish & Game Association, P.O. Box 1941, Bozeman, MT 59771-1941
Perry Backus, 65 Redtail, Dillon, MT 59725
John Gatchell, Montana Wilderness Association, P.O. Box 635, Helena, MT 59624
William Fairhurst, Public Lands Access Association, P.O. Box 247, Three Forks, MT 59752
Jack Atcheson, State Lands Coalition, 3210 Ottawa Street, Butte, MT 59701
Peter Werner, 17200 Rocky Mountain Road, Belgrade, MT 59714
Harry Armstrong, 15980 Rocky Mountain Road, Belgrade, MT 59714

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for your interest in Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposal to fund the construction of a parking lot for a private landowner to facilitate access across private land to land-locked public ground. The proposed action was to fund the construction through the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Access Montana Program.

A legal notice was placed in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle newspaper for the review of the Draft Environmental Assessment. It was sent to a distribution list and was put on the State of Montana Electronic Bulletin Board for review. There was a 30-day comment period, which ended November 8, 2001. One comment was received and has been addressed in the Decision Notice.

Gallatin

Based on the analysis in the Environmental Assessment, I have determined that the process has satisfactorily complied with the Montana Environmental Policy Act. The proposed action poses no significant impact to the natural or human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. The decision has been made to proceed with the preferred action alternative as described in the EA. This decision adopts the Draft Environmental Assessment as the final document.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick J. Flowers', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Patrick J. Flowers
Regional Supervisor

Enclosure

DECISION NOTICE
Construction of a parking area for hunter access on the Armstrong Ranch
in the Bridger Mountains.
Prepared by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
December 24, 2001

Proposal

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to construct a parking area for hunter access on the Armstrong Ranch in the Bridger Mountains.

Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA)

MEPA requires FWP to assess the potential consequences of this proposed action for the human and natural environment. The proposal was detailed in an Environmental Assessment (EA) completed by FWP October 18, 2001. The 21-day comment period for this EA ended November 8, 2001.

General Summary of Public Comment

One written comment concerning the project was received by the November 8, 2001 deadline. This comment was from the neighboring landowner to the north of the Armstrong Ranch who had many questions addressing the proposed project. FWP's responses are listed below with comments. No other comments were received.

1. **Please support the purpose and need for this action with the following data:**

- A) **Number of hunting permits issued for this area (312) in the past 5 years.**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Mule deer Buck</i>	<i>Mule Deer antlerless</i>	<i>Elk Antlerless</i>	<i>Goat</i>
1997	<i>Any antlered buck</i>	50	200	5
1998	50	25	200	5
1999	50	0	200	5
2000	125	0	200	5
2001	175	250	200	5
Totals	400	325	1000	25

- B) **Number of vehicles, per day, observed at the proposed access during hunting season for the past 5 years. *This data is not available.***

2. **What are the number of day trips this section of Rocky Mountain Road has experienced during hunting season for the past 5 years? *This data is not available.***

3. **How many day trips must this road see before Gallatin County initiates road upgrades to handle traffic volume?** *Unknown*
4. **What is the line-of site distance along Rocky Mountain Road, in either direction, at the location of the proposed parking area?** *This is a question that will be addressed by the county road department. They received a copy of the EA and made comment that an Approach Permit needed to be obtained prior to construction. Presumably, line-of-site distance will be considered as part of the permitting process.*
5. **Is there a minimum line-of-site distance along a road at a point of ingress-egress for safety?** *Once again, this shall be addressed if the county chooses to issue an Approach Permit.*
6. **What is the speed limit for Rocky Mountain Road?** *It is our understanding there is no posted or assigned speed limit, in which case, it defaults to 70 mph.*
7. **Have there been any accidents at the location of the proposed parking area due to cars or horse trailers turning around in the middle of the road during the past 5 years?** *No, not to our knowledge.*
8. **Have there been any complaints to the county about cars or horse trailers turning around in the middle of the road at the location of the proposed parking area during the past 5 years?** *None, that we are aware of.*
9. **If a parking area is installed and there is an increase in public use to this part of the Bridgers as a result, how does this affect FWP's game management approach for this area?** *FWP's objective is to increase hunting access into that area of the Bridgers to try and get an antlerless harvest on the elk population in that portion of 312. This herd has been steadily increasing in numbers and the department has received numerous game damage complaints from landowners in that area over the past 6 years. In the last year mule deer numbers have been rebounding to near record numbers and it is important to get an antlerless harvest on this population to avoid any future game damage problems from area landowners. FWP is also interested in providing dispersed access points for mule deer buck hunters. Non hunting season use from the public probably would not negatively effect wildlife in that area of the Bridgers. The parking access is located on the north portion of the winter range and mule deer have tended to shift their patterns to adjacent areas to the south due to an increase in housing development in the mentioned north portion of the winter range. During winter, elk move over large portions of the west slope and easily adjust to local, small-scale changes in human disturbance.*

10. **What is the Gallatin Forest Plan for the section of the Bridgers near the proposed parking area, and if there is increased public use of forest lands in this area, how will this impact the forest plan and future forest management in this area?** *This is a question for the Gallatin National Forest. They were given a copy of the EA and made no comments.*
11. **Current (easiest) access to GNF land in the mouth of North Cottonwood is across private land. FWP and current landowner have a good working relationship about allowing access during the hunting season. If the construction of a parking area results in an increase in public use, and this increase leads to detrimental impacts to the adjacent land, how will FWP address this issue?** *FWP will continue to work towards a positive working relationship with the mentioned landowner in the North Cottonwood area. This will be done during the context of the hunting season by directing hunting activities through the signing of the access, routes and neighboring private lands. Any other actions to alleviate impacts to the proposed and adjacent lands will be taken as needed. Since the proposed parking area is located on private land FWP can not dictate activities outside of the hunting seasons under our contracted agreement. This will be at the discretion of the two involved landowners.*
12. **If the parking facility results in increased use of North Cottonwood area outside of hunting season and there are detrimental impacts to neighboring property as a result, how will FWP address this issue?** *FWP will have a signed contract with the Armstrong's for activities pertaining to hunting activities only. This is a private land issue and it would be up to the discretion of the landowner to post and keep people off of their property outside of the hunting season.*
13. **If the current agreement with the private landowner is not renewed, will FWP provide a constructed public access (e.g., trail) around the private land to the forest boundary?** *This may be an option and would have to be a joint effort with the Armstrong's and the USFS. The main focus of this access is not primarily to get people in to the North Cottonwood drainage. There is a lot of hunting activity that occurs along the mountain face south of the North Cottonwood drainage.*
14. **Will the parking area be accessible year around or simply during hunting season?** *The EA implies the parking area is to serve hunters only. FWP's interest in the proposed parking area and access is for hunting season purposes but this is on private land and access at other times of the year is entirely up to the Armstrong's.*

15. COMMENTOR'S SUGGESTION:

- A. Limit parking access to hunting season only.** *This is private land and FWP's contracted agreement covers only hunting activities.*
- B. Provide restricted access to parking area to only those hunters holding permits.** *FWP's Access Montana Program provides access to "all" hunters and it would be discriminatory to provide access to only those hunters who held permits.*

Decision

It is my decision to implement the preferred alternative, which is to fund the construction of a parking lot for a private landowner to facilitate access across private land to land-locked public ground. This 100 ft. by 100 ft. parking lot will be funded through the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Access Montana Program. My decision is contingent on approval by the County of an Approach Permit, if they deem it necessary.

Based on the analysis in the Environmental Assessment and the applicable laws, regulations and policies, I have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the natural or human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. By notification of this Decision Notice, the draft EA is hereby made final.

If you have questions regarding this decision notice, please contact Pat Flowers, Region Three Supervisor or Mike Ross, Region Three Wildlife Technician at 994-4042.



Patrick J. Flowers
Regional Supervisor